

# The Motive and Method of Husserlian Phenomenology

## The Possibilities of ‘Essential Insight’

NISHI Ken 西 研

— Introduction

I — True Motive of Husserlian Phenomenology

II — How to Solve the Problem?

III — To Grasp the Essences of Our Conscious Experiences

IV — Possible Contributions of Phenomenology to Human Science

【Summary】 Husserl always characterized his phenomenology as the only method for the strict grounding of science. Therefore phenomenology has often been criticized as an obsession with the system of absolutely correct knowledge (the ‘truth’). But in this criticism the motive of Husserlian phenomenology has been completely overlooked.

The problem with which Husserl was faced is how to understand the relationship between the subjective meaningful world and the objective physical world. We often think that physics or physiology tells the objective truth and the subjective meaningful world is only accidental or derivative. But Husserl thought the exact opposite: the validity of positive or empirical science is convincing in the subjective experience of our consciousness, and therefore can be understood only by the reflective ‘insight’ of our experiences.

From this motive, Husserlian phenomenology developed two central aims.

The first is to understand the validity of the positive sciences and limit their validity to their suitable fields by reflecting on our conscious experience. To accomplish this aim, only the field of consciousness (phenomena) should be considered. This process is called ‘phenomenological reduction’.

The second aim is to create a new science that seeks to understand our internal life (the ‘science of essence’). To achieve this, the method of ‘essential insight’——grasping essential characteristics from a conscious experience——is necessary. Essential insight can generate not only an understanding of the validity of science, but also the basis of ethics, aesthetics etc. Furthermore, it helps each discipline in the human sciences attain an appropriate self-understanding.

## —Introduction

What kind of contributions can phenomenology make?

I would like to suggest two points.

1. **Human science can be liberated from its inferiority complex vis-a-vis natural science through the phenomenological explication of the validity of natural science, esp. physics.**

For example brain science can tell what is happening in one’s brain when one is falling in love

with someone. But it cannot explicate the essence of love as an experience. In general, our meaningful world cannot be elucidated by the method of natural science. Phenomenology can clarify that.

2. **Each human science can reach a clearer self-understanding of its own special discipline and conflicts between academic schools can be reduced if the object, field, problems, and methods are elucidated by the phenomenological method of ‘essential insight’.**

In order to explicate these two points, I return to **the motive and method of Husserlian phenomenology**, since his idea of phenomenology has not yet been accepted properly. In my opinion the method of ‘**phenomenological reduction**’ is often misunderstood and the importance of ‘**essential insight**’ or ‘eidetic reduction’ is hardly understood. I’d like to clarify the meaning of these concepts.

First, I elucidate the motive of Husserlian phenomenology. Through this, the meaning of the methods of phenomenology can also be explicated. Showing the connection between motive and method will enable me to elucidate these two points.

## I —The True Motive of Husserlian Phenomenology

What is the true motive of Husserlian phenomenology? Husserl used to characterize his phenomenology as the only method for the **strict grounding of science**. Therefore phenomenology has often been criticized as an obsession with the system of absolutely correct knowledge (the ‘truth’). For example, the famous philosopher Richard Rorty calls phenomenology an attempt of ‘foundationalism’. But in this criticism the motive of Husserlian phenomenology has been completely overlooked.

When Husserl says the ‘grounding of science’, what does he have in mind? This is very important but not seriously considered by critics.

### What Science Means To Husserl

First I’d like to discuss what science means to Husserl. To Husserl, science (Wissenschaft) is a **kind of knowledge whose correctness everyone can understand**. Science is also an attempt to create ‘common understanding’ through mutual insight, not by tradition or authority. I’d like to call this distinctive character of science ‘**general understandability**’. Of course this is an ideal (Idee) that most sciences cannot attain. This is an eternal aim, especially for the positive or empirical sciences.

Husserl also thinks science is tightly connected with **freedom**. To him freedom exists autonomously in Kant’s sense, and only one’s own personal insight can produce personal autonomy and freedom. And this freedom is not only of the individual, but also of human society. Husserl talks about the Renaissance ideal of science in his famous book, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1936), as follows:

“According to the guiding ideal of the Renaissance, ancient man forms himself with insight through free reason. For this renewed “Platonism” this means not only that man should be changed ethically [but that] the whole human surrounding world, the political and social existence of mankind, must be fashioned anew through free reason, through the insights of a universal philosophy” (*Crisis* § 3, p. 8/S.6)

Here philosophy means science. To him, science is engaged in the possibility of constituting our social conditions. Therefore science should cover every possible theme, including meaning and life values (cf. *Crisis* § 3 ).

### Failure of Science

This idea of science——knowledge of every kind, whose correctness everyone can examine and confirm——was advanced in the early modern age but was soon aborted. Only positive sciences (physics, physiology, economics etc) which derive their correctness or validity from observation and experimentation, were accepted as objective knowledge. People believed that meaning and life values were only subjective opinions because of the lack of observation and experimentation.

This notion of science, which is called **positivism** in *Crisis*, has become the mainstream view in Europe, where most people believe that science cannot deal with meaning and life values. Husserl wanted to reconstruct the original ideal of science so that it would have the power to analyze our meaningful life. This is the central motive of Husserlian phenomenology.

But why did the original idea fail in the early modern age? Husserl illustrates this process as follows.——Physics produced amazing discoveries in the late 17th century, leading people to believe that **the physical material world was the only objective reality**. It was also believed that observation, experimentation and mathematical procedure were the only valid scientific methods. In consequence, **the subjective meaningful world was cut off from objective reality and considered only accidental or derivative**. But the existence of God, the meaning of life, and values such as good and evil were very important matters in that age. If these were only accidental or derivative, they could have no grounding in science. Of course, knowledge of physics or physiology is unable to answer or ground them.

So the central problem becomes how to understand the relationship between the subjective meaningful world and the objective physical world.

### A New Problem Arises

Here, a new problem arises.

For example, it takes the form of a ‘**mind-brain problem**’, but that goes beyond scope of this paper. Furthermore **new trends in nursing and medicine** are closely connected with the relationship of both worlds. Doctors and nurses, on the one hand, are concerned with the application of knowledge

in natural sciences, i.e., medical science. On the other hand, they have to deal with the subjective worlds of patients and their families. They always find themselves working between two different worlds. So it is necessary to understand clearly the relationship between the subjective meaningful world and the objective physical world.

In order to solve this problem and present new methods for dealing with meaningful life, Husserl designed the science of phenomenology.

## II — Solving the Problem the Method of Phenomenological Reduction

### Consciousness as a Field of ‘Conviction-Formation’

Husserl’s solution is utterly opposite to our usual way of thinking. He believes that the validity of objective physical reality can be confirmed by the subjective meaningful world. Indeed, the validity of the objective world can be understood only through the reflective ‘insight’ of our experiences in the subjective world.

Husserl says that ‘the meaning and the existential validity’ (Sinn und Seinsgeltung) of the objective world, including all kinds of objects, numbers, and the mathematical world is convincing in terms of our subjective experience, i.e., in each one’s ‘Subject’ (cf. *Cartesian Meditations* § 8). In this sense, the existence of the subject precedes the existence of the objective world. But this does not mean that the subject, like God, creates the objective world. The subject is not the origin of the objective world in terms of causal relations.

Instead, the subject is a field of ‘**conviction-formation**’ (by Seiji Takeda), where all kinds of beings and objects—the universe, God, contemporary global society, one’s intimate others, self-images, sub-consciousness—appear and are convincing in their very existence and convincing in what and how they are.

If one wants to understand the meaning and validity of some objects or the objective world itself, one must ask the subject. In order to do this, the knowledge about the objective world should not be used; only the field of consciousness (phenomena) should be considered. This process is called ‘**phenomenological reduction**’.

### ‘World Belief’

So the first aim of Husserlian phenomenology is to **understand the validity of the positive sciences** (e.g., physics, physiology, economics, sociology, etc.). To achieve that aim, we have to explicate **the self-evident belief in the existence of the objective world**. For every positive science investigates the objective world.

The belief that the objective world exists, that it is the only real one, and that we all live there, Husserl calls the ‘**general positing of the world**’ (in *Ideas I* § 30) or ‘**World belief**’ (Weltglaube in

*Cartesian Meditations* § 15 ). Concomitant to the world belief, it is also believed that the perception of things or matter offers the only entrance to the objective world. So observation and experimentation are the most decisive methods in positive science. This world belief is the most fundamental premise of all the positive sciences.

Husserl often talked of the phenomenology of ‘things-perception’, but he didn’t have enough time to explicate the ‘world belief’. Neither could he elucidate the validity of physics and other positive sciences. I think this is one of the reasons for the misunderstanding that phenomenology does not admit the existence of the real world.

Husserl, of course, acknowledged the existence of the objective world, but at the same time, he thought that it was also a fundamental belief or conviction rooted in our consciousness, and that this aspect should and could be explicated (cf. *Afterword to Ideas I*). His basic idea of **how the world belief’ is formed and reproduced continuously** is clear:

1. I am convinced of the existence of the coherent space-time world (the objective world) because my perceptions have accorded with one another (cf. *Ideas I* § 49).
2. I am convinced that other people and I live together in the same world because my perceptions of the world accorded with others’ perceptions of it (cf. *Cartesian Meditations*, the Fifth Meditation).

Starting from these principles, we can understand the validity of the positive sciences, but this takes us beyond the scope of our topic. Instead I will simply say that the physical material world is a secondary formation deriving from the subjective meaningful world. Perceptions of things and their accordance and the continuous formation of the world belief are primary.

So the process of understanding the validity of positive science is called ‘the groundings of the positive sciences’. Rorty thinks that this grounding is impossible and unnecessary. But I think it is necessary, especially in order to limit the validity of the positive sciences to their respective fields.

### III——Grasping the Essence of Our Conscious Experiences the ‘Science of Essence’ and the Method of ‘Essential Insight’

The second aim of phenomenology is to create a new science that serves to illuminate our internal meaningful life. This is called the ‘**science of essence**’. And its method for that is called the ‘**eidetic reduction**’ or ‘**essential insight**’ (Wesenserschauung, cf. *Experience and Judgment* § 87f.).

#### What is the Essence or Essential Insight?

Husserl says that essence is a ‘pure, a priori generality’ and that is necessarily attended with every individual case. And it is acquired by ‘free imaginative variation’ (ibid.). I would also add that essence is that necessary characteristic of an experience or an object that makes it what it is. For exam-

ple the essence of ‘things-perception’ is the general form which can be found in every perception of a thing. Husserl notes that:

1. Perception as seeing is attended by the feeling of ‘liveliness’ (Leibhaftigkeit). One feels that one sees the object itself, not the image of it. (cf. *Ideen I*, § 39)
2. But if one reflects on one’s experience of perception, it is clear that only a part of the object is seen. One can see the front, but cannot see the back. (cf. *Ideen I*, § 41)
3. So the things-perception has always some anticipation or some undefined horizon, though it is the most direct and original experience of outer objects. (ibid.)
4. At the same time the background is also grasped vaguely. (cf. *Ideen I*, § 35)

In order to confirm these propositions as essence of things-perception, each individual can interrogate his or her own conscious experience. And the individual can examine their correctness, consent to them, give some supplemental meaning, or correct them. The description of essential insight is characterized by the fact that everyone can confirm its essential correctness. As I have already mentioned, it possesses a ‘general understandability’.

Positive sciences (the ‘science of fact’) were produced by experimentation, observation, and mathematical procedure. The essential insight can generate a new kind of science. This is called the ‘science of essence’. Husserl can profess ‘the philosophy of strict science’ because essential insight can provide a solid foundation from which everyone can address philosophic questions.

### The Potentiality of Essential Insight

This method can elucidate not only the validity of positive science, but also the meanings and values of our personal lives. For example, it can explicate the essence of ‘love’ or ‘broken heartedness’, the essence of sentiments such as ‘nostalgia’, the essence of ‘morality’ or ‘justice’, the essence of the ‘experience of beauty’, etc.

But its potentiality has not yet fully actualized. One reason is that the claims of critics of phenomenology (e.g. Derrida) have widely been accepted. Another reason is that Husserl himself failed to give sufficient explanations about the meaning and potentiality of the method of essential insight. Here, I would like to propose two correctives to resolve this misunderstanding.

1. The image of ‘**lonely reflection**’ should be replaced by the image of ‘**mutual exchanges of experience**’.

Husserl talks of essential insight as lonely, inner reflection. Maybe lonely reflection can produce the essential description of things-perception or mathematical calculation. In these cases, uniformity of almost everyone’s experience is expected. But if we want to grasp the essence of the experience of a

‘broken heart’, i.e. the essential meaning of our experience, we need the mutual confirmation of others’ essential descriptions.

First, I have to abstract the essential characteristics of a ‘broken heart’ by reflecting on my own experience. Second, I try to find the commonality of other people’s experience and my own. This process involves grasping my experience from the view of the commonality of everyone’s experience and this leads to understand the deep connections and also the originality of each person’s experience.

Dialogue is necessary. The exchange of mutual essential descriptions is very much like the dialogues of Plato.

2. Essential insight does not mean directly copying the a priori immanent essence in our experience. Some vital **standpoint** is necessary.

Husserlian phenomenology has often been understood as a method of copying directly the immanent essence of our experience. And Husserl’s terminology was also misleading. It is clear that copying an experience directly is impossible. If one wants to grasp the ‘essence’, there must be a ‘standpoint’ or a ‘direction of question’.

For example, Husserl’s essential description of things-perception is attended by the question of how a conviction of the existence of the perceived object is formed. But if one asks the question of how things-perception is connected with our life interest, another essential view of things-perception becomes possible. As Heidegger notes that things appearing in our daily life have their ‘uses’ (They have ‘readiness-to-hand’ or *Zuhandenheit*, cf. *Being and Time* § 15). Therefore, essential insight or essential description is ‘standpoint-correlative’. No standpoint, no essence.

This does not mean, however, that all knowledge is only relative. If one sets an adequate standpoint and tries to extract the essence, knowledge can arise whose correctness everyone can examine and confirm. Such kinds of knowledge can be developed in the field of meaning and life values via the method of essential insight. This is the advantage of phenomenology.

#### IV—The Possible Contributions of Phenomenology to Human Science Supplemental Remarks and Conclusion

##### Back to the Introduction

Finally I wish to return to the possible contributions of phenomenology to human science. In my **introduction** I have suggested two points.

1. **Human science can be liberated from its inferiority complex vis-à-vis natural science.**

This is now clear and there is no need to add.

2. **Each human science can reach a self-understanding that more clearly delimits its own special area of inquiry, and conflicts between different schools of thought can be reduced, if the object, field, problems to solve, and methods are elucidated by the phenomenological**

### method of 'essential insight'.

Here, I will cite the example of 'the phenomenology of society'.

### What is the 'Phenomenology of Society' ?

This is different from the phenomenological sociology proposed by Schutz and Berger. The phenomenology of society explicates the essence or meaning of 'society', which is the object of sociology and the social sciences.

In sociology, there are many schools and different concepts of society. For example, the phenomenological sociology tries to explicate society by understanding meanings in the life-world. But social-systems theory (Parsons, Luhman) thinks of society as a self-controlling system. (Habermas's *Theory of Communicative Action* can be seen as an attempt to integrate both paradigms.)

In order to understand the reasons for this conflict and resolve it, it is useful to explicate the essence of the object itself, i.e., the essence of society, trying not to decide which is right. The phenomenology of society starts from considering society as a **belief** having a different dimension from that of perceived objects. It elucidates society from the standpoint of how we experience the social.

I will briefly make the following points about the essence of society.

1. **'Society' is a kind of belief that systems of 'human relations' exist widely outside one's close personal relationships.**

2. If we ask why we are interested in society, two points about the meaning of society can be made.  
(1)**General conditions governing life possibilities.**

Society is the environment that defines each person's life possibilities.

(2)**'We'-character**

When one visualizes society, it is not perceived as a mere object. It is more or less attended by feelings of 'We-ness'. So we are concerned with others' welfare and questions of social fairness, and how society as a whole works to provide the general conditions governing life possibilities.

3. **Social science tries to find problems, present possible solutions, and create social consensus.**

Social science or sociology is neither a mere corpus of social facts nor a replica of the systematic order of a society. It is rather a kind of social cooperation.

These three points offer only a rough sketch of the essence of society. Starting from here, we can investigate what kind of interests each school of sociology has and what kind of concepts it uses. It is also important to investigate what kind of social ideal it reveres. Every school has its social ideal (sometimes implicitly), and the conflicts between schools of thought reflect different social ideals. From there, the possibilities of realizing the ideal should be questioned.



In this way the phenomenology of society tries to reduce conflicts between schools, and strives to present an appropriate self-understanding of sociology. Similar attempts can undertaken in other human sciences.

#### 《References》

- Berger, P. L. / Luckmann, T. (1967). *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Penguin Social Sciences.
- Derrida, J. (1967). *La voix et le phénomène*, Presses Universitaires de France.
- Habermas, J. (1981). *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*. Frankfurt am Main : Suhrkamp.
- Heidegger, M. (1927/1984). *Sein und Zeit*. Tübingen: Niemeyer.
- Husserl, E. (1913/1992). *Ideen zu einer reinen Phaenomenologie und phaenomenologischen Philosophie. Buch I.* in Gesammelte Schriften/Edmund Husserl, Bd.5, hrsg. von Elizabeth Stroeker, Hamburg: Meiner.
- . (1930/1992). *Nachwort zu Ideen I.* in Gesammelte Schriften/Edmund Husserl, Bd.5, hrsg. von Elizabeth Stroeker, Hamburg: Meiner.
- . (1931/1992). *Cartesianische Meditationen* in Gesammelte Schriften/Edmund Husserl, Bd. 8, hrsg.von Elizabeth Stroeker, Hamburg: Meiner.
- . (1936/1992). *Die Krisis der Europaeischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phaenomenologie.* in Gesammelte Schriften/Edmund Husserl, Bd.8, hrsg. von Elizabeth Stroeker, Hamburg: Meiner.
- . (1936/1970). *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology.* translated by David Carr, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press.
- . (1939/1985). *Erfahrung und Urteil*, hrsg.von Ludwig Landgrebe, PhB Bd.280, Felix Meiner Verlag.
- Nishi, K. (2005). *Philosophical Thinking — the Core of Husserlian Phenomenology*, Tokyo: Chikumashobo, written in Japanese.
- Rorty, R. (1979). *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Takeda, S. (2004). *Phenomenology is 'the Principle' of Thinking*. Tokyo: Chikumashobo. written in Japanese.

————— [NISHI Ken • Professor of Department of Sociological Studies, Wako University, Tokyo, Japan]  
[にし けん • 和光大学現代人間学部現代社会学科教授]